

Congregations will support victims for long haul

by Linda Macqueen, editor *The Lutheran*

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Across flood-devastated Queensland, Lutheran congregations and schools have rallied to help fellow members, as well as desperate people in their communities, to recover from the immediate impact of the disaster. They are committed also to caring for victims for the long haul.

The Good News church and school complex, which is ringed by some of the worst-hit Brisbane suburbs, is acting as an official evacuation centre, providing food, accommodation and counselling for the homeless. Thirty people sought refuge there at the height of the flood crisis.

‘We have virtually adopted a Vietnamese family and a single lady from Germany, who had nowhere else to go’, Pastor Pukallus said. ‘We will continue to help them and many others in the weeks and months ahead.’

Members of the Good News community have been working frenetically to care for victims. Fifteen families from their own community were badly affected, but the members are caring also for people from the general community.

‘The response of the general public and our own Good News community has been magnificent, overwhelming!’, an exhausted Pastor Athol Pukallus told *The Lutheran*. ‘We had teams of people all over the place, helping anybody and everybody.’

St Peters Lutheran College at Indooroopilly is operating as an emergency shelter. The college, set on high ground but close to the Brisbane River and flood-affected suburbs, has Brisbane City Council permission to accommodate up to 40 people in its boarding houses.

St Peters chaplaincy team leader Pastor Peter Bowmer said that about 50 local families are being supported by the college. ‘We’re providing food, accommodation, shower and laundry facilities, as well as safe car parking.’

Students will be expected to roll up their sleeves, too. Some of the start-of-year camps will be replaced with community service projects. ‘Students will be helping to clean up Brisbane’, Pastor Bowmer said.

Pastor Nuske, returning from a clean-up of a member’s home, reflected, ‘My initial reactions to the devastation of the floods were numbness, shock, isolation, anxiety and loss of hope. These initial feelings were like those of the disciples after the crucifixion.

‘But our situation is different from theirs because the risen Christ has breathed the Spirit into us and so we can be church.’

The St John’s Ipswich has established a volunteer position to coordinate the parish’s flood recovery efforts. Pastor John O’Keefe said, ‘Some members will spend days at flood-affected properties helping the residents to clean up. Others have offered to accommodate people in need of housing and still others are delivering meals to the clean-up sites.

‘We are now also delivering “care packages” of cleaning products and kitchen and bathroom necessities.’

Around the stricken Lockyer Valley members are generally looking to the long-term providence of God and not measuring the disaster in terms of property or financial loss, Pastor Matthew Schultz said.

‘People have been pulling together to help around the community with emergency food and accommodation, and cleaning up.

‘The spiritual needs vary and are not based only on the flood’, he said. ‘But this flood has been a springboard for people to open up more regarding other concerns, too. Meanwhile, our people are getting on with parish life, too. Christ’s love and forgiveness is bigger than the flood.’

In Toowoomba, a member at Christ Church, Highfields, had been providing food for people at Murphy’s Creek for a week before she asked for help. The community there had been decimated by the ‘inland tsunami’ that crushed Grantham and Withcott also.

Pastor Christian Fandrich elaborated, ‘This lady had single-handedly been feeding about twelve people during the week and 20 on the weekend. We’ve now been able to spread the load between ladies at Our Saviour’s, Good Shepherd and Redeemer congregations.’

‘I know also that one of our ladies from Withcott has been providing food for another family.’

At Nobby on the Darling Downs, dairy farmers Ches and Del Priebbenow, unable to get their milk to the Brisbane factory because of road closures, donated it to the Salem Rest Home in Toowoomba and to anyone else whose supplies had been cut by floodwaters.

Mr Priebbenow said, ‘There were mothers who couldn’t get milk for their children; the supermarket shelves were bare. You have to help your brother in need, God tells us. You have to let your light shine.’

The real challenges are still ahead, Pastor Fandrich warns. ‘The medium- and long-term recovery will be long, more “boring”, unseen and hard to sustain. Who knows what impact these floods will have on the economy, jobs, farmers and miners?’

Pastor Pukallus agrees that the work has only just begun, ‘especially the counselling side of things’. He and Good News’s community chaplain Sean Conry have already been asked to sit with people in their ruined homes as the reality of what has happened becomes a burden too heavy to bear.

When power is restored and people can move back into their homes, there will also be the need to provide furniture and white goods.

Pastor Pukallus said, ‘We pray that the generous spirit of the people of Brisbane, Queensland and Australia will continue well into the future because this will be a long, hard road back to normality for thousands of people.’